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THE

Marriage Ceremony

OF THE

Parsees

BY

JIVANJEE JAMSHEDJI MODI · B. A.

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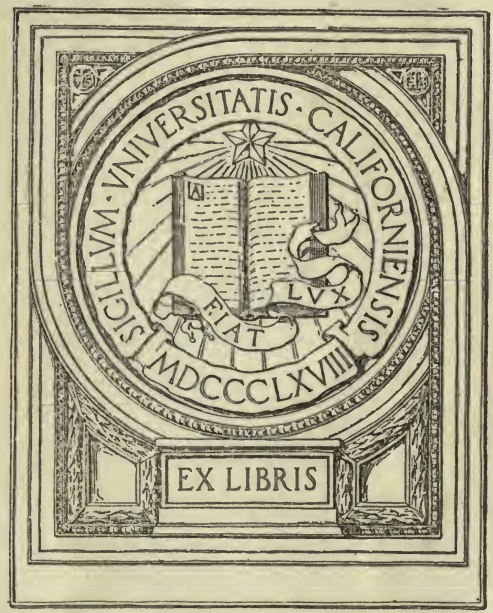

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THE

MARRIAGE CEREMONY.

OF THE

PARSEES

BY

JIVANJI JAMSHEDJI MODI, B. A.

I say (these) words to you, marrying brides and bridegrooms! Impress them upon your mind: *May you two enjoy the life of good mind by following the laws of religion. Let each one of you clothe the other with righteousness. Then assuredly there will be a happy Life for you.*

YACNA. liii. 5.

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This brocture is an abridgement of my Paper on "The Marriage Customs among the Parsees. Their comparison with similar customs of other nations," read before the Anthropological Society of Bombay, in two parts, at its monthly sittings held on 22nd February and 26th July 1899, and presided over by Lieut.-Colonel G. Waters I. M. S., and the late Mr. Khurshedji Rustomji Cama.

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I. PRELIMINARY OBSERVATIONS

Marriage the Chief Concern of Human Life.

As William Tegg says, "Marriage may with propriety be called the chief concern of human life. When we reflect that from it arises the nearest and most endearing relationships which go to form the comfort and happiness of existence in this world—husband and wife, parents and children, brothers and sisters, and many others—the importance of the institution, in all its bearings on the welfare of society, will at once be recognised. In a word, marriage may be designated the hinge of all kindred, or the strongest link in the chain that binds mankind together." [1]

Zoroastrian View of Marriage.

The Parsee religion takes a similar view of marriage. Marriage is considered as an institution that finds favour with the Almighty God. Ahura Mazda says: "O Spitama Zarathushtra! Indeed, I thus recommend here unto thee, a man with a wife above a Magava (*i.e.*, an unmarried man) who grows up (unmarried); a man with a family above one without any family; a man with children above one who is without children" (Vendidâd, iv 47.). "That place is happy over which a holy man builds a house, with

1. "The Knot tied," page 2.

fire, cattle, wife, children and good followers" (Vend. iii. 2).[1]

The Antiquity of the Marriage Ceremonies of the Parsees.

After the several vicissitudes of fortune that the Parsee community has passed through, it is difficult to determine how many, and which, of their marriage customs are originally Zoroastrian or Persian, and how many, and which, are taken from their sister communities of India. But, this much can be said, with well-nigh a certainty, that the strictly solemn, or the religious part of the ceremony, wherein the priests take part, is more or less originally Persian.

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1. Cf. . . . Honest wedlock
Is like a banqueting-house built in a garden,
On which the spring flowers take delight
To cast their modest odours.
. . . I scent the air
Of blessings when I come but near the house.

II. THE ASSEMBLY AND THE MARRYING COUPLE.

The Shahjan or the Marriage Gathering.

Marriage is considered to be an event which must be celebrated, not quietly, but with some *éclat*. It must be celebrated in the presence of an assembly (Anjuman), which can bear witness to the event.[1] According to the Dinkard, the drums and fifes (*i.e.*, the musical band) which played at marriage gatherings, announced the marriage to the people of the town or village. The assembly that gathers on marriage occasion is called Shâhjan, *i.e.*, the assembly for the queenly bride.

The Bride and the Bridegroom. The Symbolism of their dress and adornments.

The bridegroom's principal ceremonial dress is the Jâmâ-pichori, or sâyâh, which is a loose flowing dress[2] full of folds and curls. It is always white[3] in colour. The upper garment (sâri)

1. In ancient Rome and Greece also, a similar view was held about marriage. But when the assemblies began to grow large and when extravagance began to creep in, Plato restricted them to ten guests on each side.

2. A loose flowing dress is, in all ages, considered to be necessary for solemn and state occasions. In courts, churches, universities, similar loose flowing dresses like gowns and robes, play an important part. The folds of such dresses carry the idea of mystery, modsty, respect, and rank. So, women generally put on such loose flowing dresses.

3. White colour is the symbol of purity, innocence, and faith-

of the bride also is a loose dress full of folds and curls. The bridegroom holds in his hand a shawl, which is considered to be, in India, an emblem of respect and greatness. They have marks of *kunkun* (red pigment)[1] on their foreheads.

The mark on the forehead of the bridegroom is always long and vertical and that on the bride round.[2]

The bridegroom and the bride have garlands of flowers on their necks.[3] The bridegroom is called

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fullnes. The marriage ribbon knots among the ancient Romans were white.

1. The red pigment plays an important part, as a symbol, cn marriage and such other gay occasions in India. Formerly, they used to sacrifice animals on such occasions, with the belief that the sacrifice averted evil from the marrying couple. To emphacise that belief, they applied the blood of the sacrificed animal upon the forehead of the couple. So, when the custom of animal sacrifice ceased to exist, the red pigment was substituted as a symbol.

2. The long vertical mark symbolized a ray of the sun, who is the fructifying agent in nature. The mark on the forehead of the bride is round, and it symbolizes the moon, which shines by the absorbed rays of the sun, and which therefore is represented as a conceiving agent. Man is, in relation to woman, what the sun is in relation to the moon. Hence, the long and round marks, and hence this difference in the form of the marks on the foreheads of the bridegroom and the bride—one like the ray of the sun and the other like the disc of the moon.

3. Garlands play a prominent part in the marriage customs of many nations. They were common among the ancient Greeks, Romans and Jews. In old Anglo-Saxon churches the priests blessed the pair and put garlands of flowers round their necks.

var-râjâ, *i.e.*, a husband king[1] (*lit.* the loving king) and the bride is callsd *Kanyâ*.[2]

Th Arrangements at the face of Marriage.

The bridegroom is the first to take his seat in the room where the marriage is to be celebrated. The bride comes in afterwards.[3] The bridegroom takes his seat on the right hand of the bride, the right hand being a place of respect.[4] On the two sides of the bridegroom and the bride, there are two trays of rice[5] on two stands. On the stand by the side of the bride, there is a small metallic pot containing ghee

1. For the particular occasion, the bridegroom's position is taken to be elevated. In ancient times, among several nations, the marrying couple put on crowns. Among the ancient Greeks, the priests put crowns on the heads of bridegrooms. In Athens, the friends of the bride carried a crown for her. In Egypt also, the bride put on a crown. Among the Hebrews, the marrying couple were made to walk under a canopy resembling a crown. In ancient churches they kept a metallic crown which was lent to the marrying couple for the occasion.

2. Both the words, like the English word "bride," now, that the relationship is based on mutual love. The word *var* (husband) comes from the Avesta root *var*, Sans. *var*, Lat. *velle*, meaning "to love." The word *Kanya* (bride) comes from the Avesta root *kan*, to love. The English word "bride" also comes from the Avesta root *fri*, Sans. *pri*, to love.

3. To make the bridegroom wait for the bride for some time, seems to be a custom prevalent among many people. It is intended to signify that it is the husband who seeks the wife and is anxious to have her, and it is not the wife who seeks the husband

4. In christian marriages also, the bridegroom stands on the right hand of the bride.

5. Rice is the symbol of plenty and prosperity and so it is sprinkled over the marrying couple while reciting the benediction. Among the Hebrews, grains of barley were thrown in front of the marrying couple, and that was meant to denote good wishes for a numerous progeny. In Nottinghamshire and Sussex, the sprinkling of rice on the couple was a prevalent custom. In ancient Spain, not only the parents of the couple, but other passers-by in the street, also sprinkled corn.

(clarified butter)[1] and molasses. On the stands near the bride and the bridegroom there burn two candles. There stands a servant holding in one hand a censer with a burning fire and in another a little frankincense.[2]

Marriage Witnesses.

The bride and the bridegroom have each a marriage witness.[3] The nearest relations generally stand as witnesses. Usually married persons and not bachelors are preferred as marriage witnesses.[4]

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1. Ghee or clarified butter being a soft, slippery substance made out of milk, is considered to be a symbol of gentility, courtesy and obedience. The ancient Roman bride, for similar reasons, applied oil on the threshold of her house when wecoming the bridegroom to her house. Molasses is a symbol of sweetness and good temper. So, these two substances are produced by the family of the bride as symbols of good omen, wishing gentleness, peace and contentment to the couple.

2. Fire is a symbol of purity and plenty among the Parsees. Among the ancient Greeks, fire and water were held as symbols of purification and the bridegroom himself held them in his hand while welcoming his bride in his house. The Roman bridegroom held them before his bride as "necessaries of life," signifying thereby that he would supply her with all necessaries of life. The burning candles remind us of the "bridal torches" of the ancient Greeks, among whom the mother of the bride carried these torches in marriage processions. They were kindled from their family hearth.

3. It is the custom of many nations to have witnesses to testify to the event of marriage. The ancient Hebrews also had two witnesses. The Christians have two. Among the Romans the Pontifex Maximus performed the marriage ceremony before ten witnesses.

4. In the Greek Church of Russia, it is only married priests that can perform the marriage ceremony.

III. THE MARRIAGE CEREMONY.

(A) The Preliminary Ritual.

The Curtain of Separation and its removal.

The bride and the bridegroom are at first made to sit opposite each other, separated by a piece of cloth held between them by two persons as a curtain, so that they may not see each other. Their hands are joined and the curtain is held over the hands. After the hand-fastening ceremony the curtain is dropped. This part of the ritual signifies that the separation, which hitherto existed between them, no longer exists now, and that they are now united in the bond of matrimony. As long as the curtain is held between them, they sit oppoiste each other, but on its remo val, they are made to sit side by side. This also signifies that they, who were separate upto then, are now united together.[1]

1. Among the Russians of the Greek Church, "a curtain o crimson taffeta, supported by two young gentlemen, now parts the lovers, and prevents them from stealing any anxious glances from each other's eyes" (W. Tegge). Among the Hebrews the bride at first put on a veil, so as not to let her face be seen by the bridegroom. This veil was removed immediately after they were united in marriage. Among the ancient Christians, when the couple was kneeling in the sanctum, four of the assistant clergy held over their hands a pall or cerecloth, which was afterwards removed.

Marriage Knot. When the bride and bride-groom seat themselves opposite each other, sparated by a curtain, the two officiating priests pass round the chairs of both a piece of cloth, so as to enclose them in a circle. This circle symbolizes unity. The ends of the cloth are tied together with the recital of the sacred formula of Ahunavar or Yathâ Ahu Vairiyô. This signifies the tying of the marriage-knot.[1]

Hand-fastening. When the couple sit opposite each other, separated by a cloth curtain, the officiating senior priest places the right hand of one in the right hand of the other and fastens or unites them with the recital of the sacred Ahunavar formula. He fastens them with raw twist, which he puts round the hands seven times.[2]

Encircling with the Twist. After fastening the hands, the raw twist is passed round the pair seven times with several recitals of the Ahunavar prayer.

1. The custom of tying marriage knots among the Parsees seems to be very ancient. Firdousi refers to it in his account of the marriage of Zal and Rodabeh. The knot is a symbol of love, friendship and faithfulness. In old England the bride carried on her gown a number of ribbon-knots.

2. A kind of hand-fastening was known in England up to the 18th century. The marrying couple went to the river, adjoining their town, washed thair hands, and each, grasping the other's hand, took the oath of marriage. This was known as hand-fastening. Among the ancient Greeks, the ceremony of hand-fastening was considered as the ratifying agreement of marriage. Among the ancient Romans, the priests made the marrying couple sit on chairs, which were put together, and on which wool was spread, and then fastened their hands. Among the ancient Assyrians, it was the father of the bridegroom who fastened the hands of the couple with a woollen thread.

It is then passed seven times round the marriage knot of cloth described above. The process of encircling indicates union. The raw twist itself can be easily broken, but when several threads, *e.g.*, seven[1] in the above case, are twisted into one, they cannot easily be broken. So this ceremony indicates a wish that the tie of union, in which the couple is now united, may not easily be broken.

Throwing the Rice.

The bride and bridegroom are given a few grains of rice in their left hands when their right hands are fastened together. At the close of the above ritual of hand-fastening, of tying the marriage-knot, and of encircling the couple, the servant who holds fire in a vase places some frankincense on it. This is a signal for the couple to throw the rice they hold in their hands over one another. This process is watched at times with some interest by the friends of the bride and the bridegroom. The one that throws rice first over the other, is said to win. This is, as it were, a race of love. "Who won, the bridegroom or the bride?" is a question often heard in the assembly round the couple. This is to signify that the one who throws rice first, thereby indicates, that he or she will be foremost in loving and respec-

1. The number seven plays a prominent part in some Parsee rituals. Seven was a sacred number among the ancient Persians. They had seven archangels, correspondings to the seven spirits of God (Revelation v. 6, Zechariah iv. 10, Tobit xii. 15), seven heavens and seven *keshvars*, *i.e.*, zones or regions.

ting the other.[1] The throwing of rice is followed by the clapping of hands by the assembly. This expresses the approval and good-will of the assembly for the union of the couple.

(B) The Âshirvâd, the Ceremony Proper.

The solemn part of the Ceremony. The Ashirvad Prayer.

Now follows, what may be called, the strictly religious part of the ceremony, which is performed by two priests. This consists of :—

1. Preliminary blessings.
2. Questions to the witnesses and to the marrying couple.
3. Joint address by the two priests.

1. Preliminary Benedictions.

The two officiating priests stand before the marrying couple, the senior priest before the bridegroom and the junior before the bride. The senior priest then recites in Pazend the following words of benediction.

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1. In some parts of Wales. the friends of both parties went after marriage at the church, to a neighbouring inn to partake of the marriage repast. A few members of both parties ran to the inn. There was a kind of running race between them. The party who ran fast and reached the inn first, guaranteed, as it were, that the bride or bridegroom whom they represented, would be the first to show all love and respect to the other. In some parts of the South of France when the couple is kneeling at the altar after the marriage, a lady goes before them and pricks them with a pin. Both try to bear it, as well as they can. The one that bawls out or expresses the feeling of pain first is believed to be the one that would turn out less patient than the other in suffering the troubles, if any, of married life, and of this world in general.

May the Creator, the Omniscient Lord, grant you a progeny of sons and grandsons, plenty of means of provision, heart-ravishing friendship, bodily strength, long life, and an existence of 150 years."

2. Questions to the parties.

Then he puts the following question to the person who stands by the side of the bridegroom, as a witness to the marriage, on behalf of the bridegroom's family :

"In the presence of this assembly that has met together in . . .[1] on . . .[2] day . . . month of the year . . .[2] of Emperor Yazdgard of the Sassanian dynasty of auspicious Iran, say, whether you have agreed to take this maiden, . . .[3] by name, in marriage for this bridegroom in accordance with the rites and rules of the Mazdayaçnáns, promising to pay her 2,000 *dirams* of pure white silver and two *dinars* of real gold of Nishapore coinage."[4]

The witness replies : "I have agreed."

Then the following question is put to the witness on the side of the bride :

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1. Here the name of the city or the town where the marriage takes place is mentioned.

2. Here the particular Parsee day, month and year on and in which the marriage is performed are mentioned.

3. Here the name of the bride is mentioned.

4. This sum seems to have been fixed in ancient Persia as the sum to be presented by the family of the bridegroom to the bride.

"Have you and your family with righteous mind, and truthful thoughts, words and actions, and for the increase of righteousness, agreed to give, for ever, this bride in marriage to . . .[1]?"

The witness replies : " I have agreed."

Then the priest asks the mutual consent of the couple in the following words :

"Have you preferred to enter into this contract of marriage up to the end of your life with righteous mind ? "

Both reply : " I have preferred."

To make the matter doubly or trebly sure the questions are repeated three times.[2]

3 Joint Address by both the Priests.

Then follows a joint address to the marrying couple by both the priests. This address consists of :— (*a*) Admonitions, (*b*) prayers and (*c*) benedictions.

(*a*) The admonitions consist of some practical advice about one's behaviour in life.

1. Here the name of the bridegroom is mentioned.

2. Among the Christians, the banns are proclaimed three times. In the Greek Church in Russia, also, the priest puts a similar question to the couple three times Among the modern Greeks, the priest, after putting on the blessed ring, declares the marriage three times. He repeats the benedictions three times. In some of the tribes of Central Asia, *e. g.*, Dardistan, the priest asks the marrying couple and the assembled company three times whether they all consented.

(*b*) In the recital of the prayer, they pray to God to confer upon the couple certain moral and social virtues which are said to be the characteristics of the 30 *yazatas* or angels who give their names to the 30 days of a Parsee month.

(*c*) In the benedictions, certain departed worthiees of ancient Iran are mentioned by name, and it is wished that th pair may be blessed with the virtues and characteristics which had made them famous.

The ceremonstiy ends with the recital of the Tandaruçti prayer, which is a form of benediction.

BY THE SAME AUTHOR.

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The Naojôte Ceremony of the Parsees.

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WORKS EDITED BY THE SAME AUTHOR.

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